



# WHAT'S OLD



# Green Burial Is More than a Choice, It's a Movement

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by Rachel Essig

**IN AN ERA WHERE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS** is reshaping every facet of our lives, it's no surprise that our industry is following suit. Recent surveys reveal a significant shift in consumer preferences, with 61.7% and 84% of respondents expressing interest in environmentally sustainable funeral and cemetery options according to several industry surveys. This growing demand reflects a broader societal trend toward sustainability, and the Green Burial Council (GBC) has been at the forefront of guiding this transformation. For nearly two decades, the GBC has championed eco-friendly practices, educating both consumers and industry professionals while developing rigorous certification standards.

## *BECOMES NEW AGAIN*

Green or natural burial methods have been a standard practice for thousands of years across various cultures, making them deeply traditional in a historical context. These practices often emphasize simplicity and environmental sustainability, such as using biodegradable materials and avoiding toxic chemicals.

In contrast, many contemporary post-Civil War burial practices, have become more industrialized. These practices often involve embalming, metal caskets, and concrete vaults, which can be considered more “modern” or “conventional” in comparison to traditional green burials. The shift toward green burials today can be seen as a return to older, more traditional practices, aligning with a growing desire to prioritize environmental concerns and for people to be more involved in the care of their loved one.

Embracing green burial practices challenges the notion that modern practices are the only conventional way of handling end-of-life arrangements. Consumers clearly see this—natural burial is not new, and they know this.

So, how does a cemetery incorporate environmentally sustainable options and what does memorialization look like in practice? As a cemeterian and board member of the GBC, I have seen firsthand how cemeteries can embrace green practices while still meeting conventional needs. The key is adopting the GBC's hybrid certification standard, which offers a flexible approach to green burial that can coexist with conventional methods.

### **A Hybrid Approach**

A very simple and easy way for a cemeterian to offer green burial is to become a GBC hybrid cemetery and allow green burial intermixed with conventional vaulted burial. This allows the cemetery to perform the same landscape maintenance as with the rest of the cemetery and retain or increase the sale of a marker, bench, or upright memorial.

As a cemeterian, my experience has been working with a typical couple coming to plan and wanting graves side by side, but perhaps one spouse doesn't like the idea of “being in dirt” and wants a vault, but the other spouse is an avid nature lover and wants their remains to naturally go back to the earth.

In a hybrid green-conventional cemetery, you can meet the needs of both. Many of you may be wondering about that vault sale. What I have seen is the consumer valuing the memorial service or the physical memorial itself more than a vault. So, this same couple may focus on spending more for a monobench, upright memorial, or two ledgers. If you have a combo facility, this also may equate to the client spending more on a full funeral service, catering, and personalization.

Other cemetery operators may also choose to invest in designating a section of the cemetery for green burials, which can feature minimal landscape maintenance. This area could be developed into a natural meadow, promoting biodiversity and reducing upkeep. Memorialization in this space can be both traditional and innovative.



**By adopting the Green Burial Council's hybrid certification standard, cemeteries can offer green burial options without abandoning conventional practices.**

Cemeteries can collaborate with local masons to create stone memorials using regionally sourced materials or introduce virtual memorials marked by GPS technology. Cemeteries who choose to add a dedicated section can still maintain their conventional sections as they always have.

**Consumers Focus on Memorialization**

From my experience in cemetery management, I have observed that clients interested in green burial often value the natural process of returning to the earth. They appreciate the simplicity of green burials and the opportunity to engage deeply in the memorialization process.

For many, the gravesite represents more than just a resting place—it symbolizes a meaningful connection with nature. These natural burial clients value more traditional beliefs in deathcare. So, the memorial is important to them as these clients tend to frequently visit their loved one.

Shifting your business model slightly to meet consumer demand is not as hard as you might think, and you may be surprised. I've had a client pre-plan to have a 12-foot column for his gravesite and another create an elaborate granite memorial complete with spiritual symbols for his wife. It was truly a piece of sculpture made from granite. Both examples are natural burial graves.

**From Cremation to Green Burial**

Oregon has a very high cremation rate, over 80%, so let me point out what offering natural burial at the combo I managed did to this statistic. The funeral home had a cremation rate of about 60% +/- and the cemetery was steady year over year at 55% cremation placement and 45% casketed burial. Of the 45%, one-third of clients chose a natural burial.

It was not uncommon for clients who prearranged for a cremation to come in and change their pre-arrangements to a natural burial. I was curious as to why and asked several clients their reasoning. Clients

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frequently cited simplicity and environmental concerns as their primary reasons for switching to green burial. They were drawn to the idea of a natural return to the earth and valued having a tangible memorial space for their family to visit.

We hosted “lunch and learns” and described the five forms of disposition that are available in Oregon: flame cremation, water cremation, natural organic reduction, conventional vaulted burial and green burial. Oregonians like the outdoors and attendees were attracted to the idea of being buried naturally and have a grave where their family could visit. They value memorialization.

Attendees would often comment that they thought their only choice was flame cremation and preferred the idea of natural earth burial with a memorial.

It’s sad to think there are thousands of people out there who believe their only environmentally friendly option is cremation when they could have a natural burial, especially when it is so easy to add to an existing cemetery.

### Cremation Memorialization

Memorialization was as important for this location’s 55–60% of cremation clients. One other thing to consider is clients who choose to scatter. A popular solution is cenotaph memorialization or offering to clients to purchase a space without placement of cremated remains. Both options were very popular.


Other options include creating a “cremation memorial trail” in unused parts of your cemetery along the property line or adjacent to a tree line. This includes creating a footpath and lining it with cremation memorial product. At this location, we offered free scattering of cremated remains once a year. This is a popular event that relieves the burden of people who have not been able to scatter or place on their own but are in possession of cremated remains.

A cemetery tour was offered to each person reserving the free scattering, and often once the client saw what memorialization options are available, they changed their plans to include permanent placement and memorialization of their loved one’s cremated remains. The free scattering event also provided investment in our community and served as a solution for those with urns in storage. With each scattering, the decedent’s information was logged in the cemetery’s records just as any other interment.

### It’s a Culture Thing

The shift toward environmentally sustainable funeral and burial options reflects a broader cultural movement toward sustainability. By adopting the Green Burial Council’s hybrid certification standard, cemeteries can offer green burial options without abandoning conventional practices. This approach allows for a balance between environmental responsibility and consumer preferences, ensuring

that memorialization remains both meaningful and aligned with contemporary values.

As the demand for green options continues to grow, embracing these practices will not only meet the needs of today’s clients but also contribute to a more sustainable future. 

**Rachel Essig** is the board treasurer for the Green Burial Council (GBC) and contributes to governance and certification standards committees. Formerly the executive director of River View Cemetery, Oregon, Rachel continued to grow River View’s standing in natural burial as the funeral home and cemetery were early adopters of being GBC certified in 2009. Rachel’s cemetery career spans managing 14 municipal cemeteries, and for-profit and nonprofit combo facilities. She was ranked in the top 10% of managers in SCI’s central business unit. With extensive cemetery experience, Rachel has presented at major industry conferences and to the Oregon legislature.



The graphic features a dark green background with a white circular logo on the left containing the text 'ICCFA WEBINARS'. To the right of the logo, the text 'ICCFA' is written in a serif font above 'WEBINARS' in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Below this, the text 'CALL FOR PRESENTATIONS' is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. Underneath, a question is posed: 'Do you have deathcare knowledge or best practices to share?' in a white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, a white rectangular button contains the text 'SUBMIT A PROPOSAL TODAY!' in a bold, green, sans-serif font. The URL 'iccfa.com/webinars' is written in a white, sans-serif font at the very bottom.